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SUBJECT: Fiji: Unapologetic Bainimarama Calls in the Media

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Summary

11. (SBU) Interim Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama met with media editors and news directors yesterday to insist them that his government would uphold media freedom but warned that the media have to report the truth, avoid politics and exercise balance. The meeting followed the May 2 expulsion of Australian Evan Hannah, the publisher of Fiji's largest circulation newspaper, the Fiji Times, a News Corporation publication. Bainimarama asked the media to support the interim government's nation-building agenda. While News Corporation claimed that Bainimarama openly threatened the media with further expulsions and other reprisals if they refused to heed his warnings, local reports from the meeting painted a less confrontational exchange. The PM's permanent secretary said May 6 that media is exaggerating the Commodore's statement that he may shut down Fiji's media.

Bainimarama, Good Cop-Bad Cop

12. (SBU) A government media release quotes Bainimarama as having told his audience that he "would like to restate the Interim Government's unwavering commitment of its constitutional obligation of Freedom of the Press and other media as enshrined in Section 30(b) of our Constitution." However, he reportedly went on to say that "with any freedom also comes responsibility. Partisan agendas, cultural insensitivity and deliberate distortions in media reporting can do untold damage to the fabric of a nation and indeed have unfortunate repercussions." The Fiji Times reported that editors and publishers are henceforth expected to state their political affiliations.

13. (SBU) Press accounts report that the PM's remarks sparked a lively discussion between the Commodore and the editors and managers, including some "loud and stern exchanges." Fiji Times Editor Netani Rika, who attended the meeting, said that Bainimarama accused the media of hating him and of being unfairly critical of him and his government. The Times reported that Bainimarama said the matter of Times publisher Hannah's expulsion is closed. Like Fiji Sun publisher Russell Hunter, who was expelled in an almost identical action in late February, Hannah will not be allowed to return to Fiji, he said. Government officials have repeatedly stated that the two journalists had breached the terms of their work permits by engaging in activities that were a threat to "national security" and the decisions to expel them will not be reviewed. Both Hunter and Hannah have filed legal challenges against the actions taken against them.

News Corp Sees a Threat

¶4. (SBU) According to some Australian media accounts of the Monday meeting, Bainimarama warned that there could be more deportations. At the same time, Interim Immigration Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who signed the orders expelling Hunter and Hannah, said "The deportation (of Hannah) does not affect anyone else. It does not preclude anyone else that News Limited (the newspaper operating arm of News Corporation) would want to appoint as publisher." Striking a positive note, the publisher of the Daily Post said the meeting gave both sides a chance to air their views about how the interim government and media have dealt with one another. He said the interim government had promised to be more accessible to the media in the future. Neither the Post nor radio outlet Legend News reported threats from Bainimarama, but Times editor Rika is extensively quoted in News Limited media organizations in Australia as saying that Bainimarama threatened to shut down the media if they did not stick to reporting "only the facts".

¶5. (U) News Limited issued a statement that has run on all its Australian outlets. Campbell Reid, the director of News Limited's editorial operations, said the personal intervention of the head of the interim government was "deeply troubling" for Australians living in or visiting Fiji. "The interim government of Fiji having already dispensed with parliamentary democracy and the freedom of the press now clearly intends to ignore the rule of law, thereby erasing the last hope that Fiji could avoid becoming a military dictatorship once again," Reid said. "Clearly, the assertion by Fiji officials that the deportation of Evan Hannah should have no bearing on our investment in Fiji is laughable in the face of Bainimarama's threat to shut down the media and his confirmation that Evan will not be

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able to return to Fiji". Mr Parmesh Chand, Permanent Secretary in the PM's Office responded that "Both the Government side and the media discussed frankly what their respective concerns were. It is unfair now that media is strategically picking up issues from that meeting and in the process sensationalizing them."

Comment

¶6. (SBU) The meeting called by Bainimarama may have been intended to allay fears of a wider crackdown on media freedom, but it has instead resulted in more negative headlines on the extensive News Limited media network. Since the meeting was not a press conference, what exactly Bainimarama told the media bosses was not recorded. Some of the reporting and editorials keyed to the meeting are almost conciliatory in tone. The quality of Fiji journalism is mediocre, and every Fiji government complains about it. The cold-blooded expulsions of two expatriate journalist/editors have clearly focused minds. Socks will be pulled up, but it is unlikely that the Fiji media will be cowed yet.

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